



During a lecture delivered at the London School of Economics in late October of this year, Keith Hart, a professor there, said that sometimes people ask him why he studies economics—money, specifically—and this was his answer: “Because I want to save my family from the holocaust that’s coming up.” Naturally, his words drew the sort of privileged and intellectual laughter you’d expect in such a distinguished place as the LSE. But, of course, he was serious. He said, “If you don’t have an interest in money, then good luck to you.”¹ He was speaking of the brave new financial world in which we all find ourselves—a world for which (as far as I can tell) not too many economists are optimistic. Professor Hart’s grim prophecy was really but a slip of the tongue, a brief moment of lifted veil—and he was serious.

Now he’s not the only economic and political doomsayer, either present or past, of course. Such like have always been ready to hand with one offering of gloom or another—some foolish, some frighteningly plausible. Almost a century ago the economist, John Maynard Keynes—depressed, isolated, labelled unpatriotic—wrote *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, warning of the disaster awaiting the world because of the vindictive terms of the Treaty of Versailles at the end of World War I. “The Peace...can bring nothing but misfortune,” he said—his warning at the time falling upon very deaf political ears.² He was vindicated just over a decade later, of course, with the rise of Hitler—the rest being, as they say, history. In our day, Thomas Piketty, the French economist and currently the talk of the economic world, warns that “the risk of a drift toward oligarchy is real and gives little reason for optimism about where the United States is headed.” “The egalitarian pioneer ideal has faded into oblivion,” he said, “and the New World may be on the verge of becoming the Old Europe of the twenty-first century’s globalized economy.”³ Dire indeed, and not uncontroversial—but certainly foreboding—giving, perhaps, the wiser among us some pause.

Now I have neither the expertise nor the willingness to pass judgment upon any economist, nor do I want to waste too much more time talking about the “dismal science.” I bring all this up simply as an example, really, of the controversial character of the prophetic. That is, I want simply to point out that all of these theories and warnings: they have been roundly debated, are being debated, and will be debated world without end. As in economics, so too in other areas of thought and action—politics, philosophy, the Church. Some put forward a warning—prophecy if you like—and others criticize it, some even deride it. This seems to be simply the way it is in society today, in our world of purchased news. Alasdair MacIntyre, the philosopher, was right when he said, “There seems to be no rational way of securing moral agreement in our culture.”⁴ Argument is a lost art. The prophetic today is more likely to be belittled than believed. Warnings, prophecies, mere seriousness—none of it adds up to anything more than a punchline these days. Kierkegaard said once, “I think the world will come to an end amid general applause from all the wits, who believe that it is a joke.”⁵ I think that’s true. I think there is in us today a general incapacity for prophecy. We can only laugh at it—anything but take it seriously.

¹ “The Social Life of Money.” London School of Economics: Public Lectures & Events. October 23, 2014. <http://www.lse.ac.uk/newsAndMedia/videoAndAudio/channels/publicLecturesAndEvents/player.aspx?id=2656>

² Nicholas Wapshott, *Keynes Hayek*, 10

³ Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, 514

⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 6

⁵ *The Parables of Kierkegaard*, 3

But prophecy has always been hard to hear. All the ancient prophets bear witness to that. The king of Judah, centuries ago, burnt the scroll—line by line—containing the words of the Lord, the words given to Jeremiah.⁶ Amos, that farmer prophet: they told him, “Go away, make your money somewhere else!”⁷ Ahab, that old king of Israel: he was surrounded by an army of yes-men prophets. They told him anything he wanted to hear. But there was one who told him the truth—Micaiah was his name—and Ahab said, “but I hate him...he prophesies only evil about me.”⁸ It’s not just a modern phenomenon, our dislike of prophecy and prophets. We’ve been stoning them for centuries. It’s nothing new at all.

And so we come to consider the gospel today. Jesus has come into his temple—fighting scribes, and Pharisees, and elders with little to show for it in the end. So Jesus takes a turn for the prophetic and the apocalyptic. He talks about the destruction of the temple, the end of the world, the “desolating abomination,” “tribulation,” and the coming of the “Son of Man...in the clouds’ with great power and glory.”⁹ And then at the end, he simply says, “Watch!”¹⁰ He doesn’t give any other details; he just says, “Watch!” Surely he knew what we make of prophets and their warnings. In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus says, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you...kill the prophets and stone those sent to you.”¹¹ Yet he still played the prophet. Still he warned of the end of all things and wrapped it all up by simply saying, “Watch!” It’s a curious move on his part to say the least.

Now, in all likelihood, what Jesus was doing—taking up the idioms and images of prophecy and apocalypse—was inviting his disciples to see things more deeply—spiritually, eschatologically, to speak like a theologian—that is, in the light of eternity. In a peasant, they needed to be able to see a prophet. In a criminal, they needed to be able to see a king. And in death, they needed to be able to see love and victory. What he wanted his disciples to gain was an entirely new view of the world and of history—a view beyond the petty logics of tribalism and violence. Seeing Jesus’ impending death on the cross as victory and not abject failure was just the beginning. His disciples needed to be able to see the whole universe afresh, lit up with love instead of death—even though, on the surface, the only thing most people could see was some peasant charismatic that had gotten himself into trouble—some petty execution on some forgetful and cloudy day.

So when Jesus says, “watch,” he’s asking his disciples—and us—to look upon the world with more than the naked eye. He’s asking us to see the world with the eyes of faith. When Jesus says, “watch,” he’s asking us to see all things in the light of eternity, in light of the fact that he is the redeeming king of all—the king to be obeyed, whose virtues should be ours, even in the face of hatred. And he was clear: the days ahead will be dark for his disciples—darker for those who aren’t—but dark enough for believers. “[T]he world hates you,” Jesus said bluntly.¹² We shouldn’t be surprised by that. Our task simply is to look through the hatred of the world to see the infinite love of a God who redeems and reconciles it all. There have been times in the past, and there will be times in the future when we will need to look upon this wicked world with the deeper eyes of faith—times when it seems evil has triumphed, when it seems wickedness has won the day. Such

⁶ Jeremiah 36:23

⁷ Amos 7:12 *paraphrase*

⁸ 1 Kings 22:8 *paraphrase*

⁹ Mark 13:2, 14, 19, 26, 31

¹⁰ Mark 13:37

¹¹ Matthew 23:37

¹² John 15:19

are the times we need to see more than others do. Such are the times we need, in Jesus' words, to "watch." And such is the time.

Now I can't get any more specific than that. For starters, I wouldn't know quite what to say; and on top of that, we don't really like preachers to get to the point these days, do we? We like our preachers to be vague and comfortable, not specific and demanding—that's when people walk out and write emails invoking something called the "real world." Twain once began a speech by saying that although he was asked to talk, he was asked to be "careful not to say anything."¹³ That's how preachers feel most of the time—or at least I do. Some have braved the role of the prophet and suffered for it. Maybe I'll achieve that painful excellence someday. For now, however, I think it best simply to invite you to consider the challenge of the prophetic—to ask you simply to watch.

In this season of Advent we're asked to watch ostensibly for the coming of Christ—liturgically at Christmas but ultimately on the clouds. But I think the gospel today asks us to do even more than that. Jesus is asking us to see the truth as it is sometimes revealed in provocative prophesy. Consider the message you dislike, the word, the teaching, the truth you dismiss because you think you know better. Consider the warnings of the prophets wherever they may be. Maybe we're not ready to hear the truth. Maybe we get the preachers we deserve. I don't know what to tell you. All my spirit seems to want to say is this: in all seriousness, brothers and sisters, watch. For the good of your souls, watch. As a preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ, that's all I have to say today. It's all I can hear myself, today. Watch.

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¹³ *The Wit and Wisdom of Mark Twain*, 220